

# THE LOST GIRL

BY KATE MCMILLAN

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# Liminal Survival: Kate McMillan's *The Lost Girl*

**K**ate McMillan's *The Lost Girl* speaks to us of a space and time of liminality: of transitions between what has been, and that which is to come, and of humankind at a threshold between 'civilization' and a future which is simultaneously uncertain and dystopian. As with many dystopian narratives of our contemporary era, we enter into this story in media res, with scarce information about what has happened to create the landscape we see unfolding. Yet a rich set of signifiers invite us to draw connections between this depopulated realm and our own world.

The work is titled after D.H. Lawrence's novel of the same name. Lawrence's *Lost Girl* narrates the tale of a child's coming of age as her father's fortunes are failing; McMillan's protagonist, 13 year old Luna Walsh Le Pera, like Lawrence's Alvina Houghton, appears to have fled the world of men. She calls to mind a familiar trope in *Bildungsroman* narratives from C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) to Philip Pulman's *His Dark Materials*: the untamed child, released from parental control and left to navigate complex moral terrain. Such figures occupy a fraught liminal temporality between childhood and adulthood. They oscillate between cruelty and creativity, savagery and empathy, survival and failure.

McMillan's invocation of Lawrence functions as a synecdoche for key themes in the work, not least the role of men in determining female fortune or failure, and ultimately, survival. In this narrative, the landscape of detritus and debris can be understood as representing

a threshold moment in the deep time of humanity: the era of our current geological epoch the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, that era in which mankind's impact on the earth has become irreversible, has abandoned the girl alongside the material waste of late capitalism and excessive consumption. In Lawrence's increasingly misogynistic fiction, notions of social Darwinism – scientific rationalism, evolution, the survival of the fittest and extinction of the weakest – were central. Le Pera, wandering through an otherwise posthuman world without language, is left to evolve to survive: to create new modes and forms of meaning-making and communication from the remnants and ruins of human civilisation and speech. Physical signifiers include a fire engine horn fashioned into a musical instrument, a handmade navigational device used to teach sailors how to understand ocean signalling systems, bits of wire, string, rope, and a bronze music stand. These objects are the material afterlife of key tenets of Western human civilization and progress: ingenuity, exploration, the mastery of nature, and the attainment of knowledge.

The beach, itself a liminal space between the land and the ocean, brings to mind the anthropogenic erosion of the earth's coastlines in a time of accelerating climate change. The recurrence of plastic matter, in the girl's dress and as the stuff of her play, acts as a reminder of our own world: a world in which each minute sees a truckload of waste plastic enter the ocean, where plastic has been found even on the most remote uninhabited islands. Le Pera's abandonment in this space is the result of men's collective failure to preserve this earth, but her agency still persists. This struggle for survival is also a



key theme in Lawrence's writing, and Alvina of his *Lost Girl*, like Le Pera, is faced with extinction but also with the possibility of choice.

Yet if McMillan's lost girl is Alvina, we can also see in her an echo of the Greek Goddess Mnemosyne. Also irrevocably shaped by men (Mnemosyne bore 9 children to Zeus), she embodies a capacity to remember, without which power alone (as represented by Zeus himself) is useless. Without memory, there can be no reason, no order, no creativity, and ultimately, no survival. As such, Mnemosyne was the Goddess of wisdom as well as memory, and an inventor of language. Mnemosyne alone is the one who knows everything, what was, what is and what will be. It is by her ability to remember that Le Pera can create new forms from the detritus of language and culture. Mnemosyne and her children, the 9 Muses, were said to have inspired the language of Kings and poets. Those who drank from Mnemosyne's springs would remember everything forever – those who might be able to survive – unlike those who drank from the parallel river Lethe who would remember nothing, and who were thus incapable of evolution.

This work exists in the blurred space between autobiography and imagination. Its setting, Botany Bay, is the namesake of the first site of contact between the British and the indigenous Gadigal people of the Eora Nation in what is now called Sydney. McMillan was brought up on the northern coastal plain of Perth, Australia, a landscape with an uncanny resemblance to Botany Bay and which is also Mooro, home to the Whadjuk Noonghar people. A regular visitor to Botany Bay as a child visiting English relatives, her choice of

this landscape as backdrop to Le Pera's experiences infuses the film with her own individual memories alongside collective memories of colonial displacement and violence in Australia. The deserted spaces speak of the absence of their original populations. The survivors of such violence across the globe are now disproportionately affected by the impact of anthropogenic climate change, as the legacy of colonialism continues to determine survival or destruction.

This is a work that impels consideration of the destruction of the earth, but offers a glimpse of hope. We might locate this hope in the cave to which Le Pera withdraws. In Plato's well-trodden analogy, 'Life is like being chained up in a cave, forced to watch shadows flicker across a stone wall'. The occupants of Plato's cave are only exposed to shadows of reality, comfortable in ignorance, until one leaves and sees the forms that had cast them. Plato's cave forces confrontations: with the messiness of representation, the question of what knowledge is and where it comes from, and with the possibility of speaking truth to power and convention. For Le Pera, the world as previously known has been destroyed, but she can yet emerge from this most liminal and shadowy of spaces to re-make it. The *Lost Girl* invites us to turn our 'whole souls' around and see what is behind us in order to look forward to the uncertainty of the future and create anew.

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